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SECTION B

LOOKINGBACK

Miles helped forge county

Iron pioneer saw firing of area's first furnaces

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One of the most fascinating and influential figures in Colonial and post-Revolutionary America was Samuel Miles.

Soldier. Patriot. Merchant. Politician. Mayor of Philadelphia while it was the nation's capital. A "zealous Baptist," according to one historian, who married a Quaker. At various times a steadfast Whig, anti-Constitutionalist, Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican.

Miles was all of these.

And with John Patton, Miles was "the first to make iron in what is now Centre County," Sylvester K. Stevens wrote in "The Centre Furnace Story: A Return to Our Roots."

Photos provided/David McCann

This well-known Gilbert Stuart portrait of Col. Samuel Miles, a founder of Centre Furnace and Milesborough (today Milesburg) passed down through the McKean family and is now part of the collection in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. The portrait of Miles' wife, Catherine Wister Miles, is owned by a descendant who believes it, too, was painted by Stuart.

In 1772, Col. Miles bought about 9,000 acres, "embracing nearly all the arable land of what is now Miles Township," Stevens (in the 1985 edition revised and expanded by Philip S. Klein) wrote.

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Landowner helped fire county's iron furnaces

Miles, *continued from B1*

After the Revolution, Miles leased or sold much of that land to Pennsylvania German farmers, who continually plowed up rich iron ore, giving birth to Miles' idea of "producing iron in this wilderness, both for its own high value and as a means of speeding the influx of settlers to enhance the value of his acreage," according to Stevens, citing the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography.

That idea lead to Centre Furnace, Harmony Forge and — it is safe to say — Centre County itself.

In 1792, Miles purchased the land that would become Milesborough, as recounted in "From Milesborough to Milesburg: 200 Years of History."

Seven years later, his wife of 36 years, Catherine Wister Miles, died.

Catherine was a daughter of a wealthy Quaker merchant who helped launch the young Miles on his mercantile career, which initially involved rum and wine, and later dry goods and housewares.

According to descendant David McCann's research, the only known record of Catherine is a heartwarming letter — now in the possession of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia — she wrote to Philadelphia scientist David Rittenhouse, in which she asks for Rittenhouse's assistance in saving the Miles' Philadelphia house from British occupation.

We know what Catherine looked like, however, thanks to a portrait that was rescued from a house fire in Milesburg and given to a descendant, Mary Miles McCann, of Zanesville, Ohio, in the late 1800s and is now owned by Donald Miles McCann Jr. His son, David, of Akron, believes it was painted by noted artist Gilbert Stuart, whose well-known portrait of Col. Miles is part of the collection in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Stuart's studio was adjacent to the home of Catherine's brother in Germantown, McCann noted in a paper describing his research.

The canvas, covering a piece of hewn wood, the portrait's features, the vivid brush strokes — all bear the tell-tale marks of Stuart's hand, McCann believes.

The art world — being the art world — has been slow to embrace McCann's conclusion. But that has done little to dampen his enthusiasm for his historical detective work.

"What an exciting undertaking this has been for me — almost to the point of my literally walking in the footsteps of these two human beings," McCann wrote of his forebears, Samuel and Catherine Miles.

Dec. 29 marks the 200th anniversary of Col. Samuel Miles' death.

This is part of a series, appearing Mondays, of historical photographs from the Centre County region. If you have a historical photo that can be used for publication, contact Rich Kerstetter at 231-4621, or via e-mail.

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